

# Labor Mortis

By Kyle Gann

Ben Neill

David Lopato

Ben Neill's *Downwind*, premiered by his Mainspring ensemble October 23 and 24 at the new Thread Waxing Space, wove together two stories. One told about the death in 1734 of celebrated Baroque trumpet virtuoso Gottfried Reiche, who collapsed from a stroke while performing under Bach's direction, partly due to breathing the fumes of torches. The other concerned a plutonium processing plant in Fernald, Ohio, which disguised itself as an animal feed factory for 30 years, and was finally closed down by an environmental action group after numerous cancer incidents. The common link? Death from doing your job.

Had I not read those stories before the performance, I don't think I would have picked them up from the piece. *Downwind* divided itself among genres: a post-minimal dance rock political multimedia collage piece with improvisation. Collaborating artist Jim Conti supplied the theatrics by superimposing brightly colored slides of German villages and geometric patterns over the stage. Satisfying some genres better than others, *Downwind's* inspirations were more musical than political, and the stories, alluded to in recorded narrative fragments, were pushed to the background. The piece worked most originally as

an exploration of brass archetypes diffracted through various new-music structures. A virtuoso himself, Neill plays a three-belled, computer-linked trumpet he calls the Mutantrumpet. He's done a lot of research into *Abblasen* music, a sort of all-is-well signal used to reassure townfolk in baroque Germany. Trumpet playing, not plutonium, was *Downwind's* real topic.

Fanfares ran throughout. Some of them reiterated one note, others played a reveille-like four-beat phrase, still others spread into winding melodies. Neill skewed them, echoed them, droned with them, surrounded them with computer sounds, folded them into dance rhythms fast and slow, and layered them in augmentation canons. One nice touch was the ensemble's eclectic yet perfectly blended instrumentation: trumpets and trombones from the classical world; a rock drummer (Don Yallech); and sliding c&w chords of a pedal steel guitar (Chris Nappi, who learned the instrument for this gig and acquitted himself well). When the drums pounded in 4/4, Neill began a new fanfare every 11th eighth-note for subtle phasing effects. (Can you believe I sit at concerts and count these things? You learn a lot of structural secrets that way.) More complex sections had an Ivesian effect, trumpets blaring through the racket in canonic imitation.

Neill, who begins this season as music curator of the Kitchen, is a Rhys Chatham protégé, and also Chatham's trumpet teacher, so the

influence has run both ways. *Downwind's* foursquare rock beat, cyclical structures, and deafening volume were Chathamesque marks. The remarkable computer manipulations of Neill's mutant horn were pervasive but hidden beneath the surface. A feverish (and applauded) improv section seemed more an attempt to cover all Downtown bases than a requirement of the piece's aesthetic. But the dance rhythms, enlivened by intricate counterpoint, were totally honest. Few composers have fused such diverse instruments, techniques, and styles with so little self-consciousness, nor drawn such complexity from such simple and engaging materials.

So what happened to poor Reiche, and the betrayed citizens of Fernald? The former was represented by humorous excerpts from a 17th-century trumpet guild rulebook, which made a textual counterpoint to the fanfares. The women of Fernald, interviewed by Neill, described nightmares: "I looked out in a field," said one, "and people were laying there, and they were dead, and I thought, 'Am I the only one alive?'" No sooner had she said it, though, than a computer modulated her voice and abstracted it into yet another sound layer. Was there a metaphor in the music to illustrate the stories? Perhaps only in the reminder that critics can eventually go deaf if we keep forgetting to bring our earplugs. That's a job hazard, too.

(Thread Waxing Space, by the way, at 476 Broadway, is a welcome new venue. It's inaugurated a new music series, which filled its 300 seats the first night, and half of them the second.)

David Lopato is a talented jazz



COREEN SIMPSON

Neill composed fanfares for endangered workers.

pianist who once had a good idea for a minimalist piece. Maybe there's more to him than that, but that's all we learned October 23 at Roulette. Lopato began his *Dance for Piano and Adhesive Tape* (written in 1975) by striking two notes on the keyboard. One by one, he taped down keys to allow certain strings to vibrate sympathetically, so that resonances accumulated as the music progressed. Gradually, in that well-known '70s way, a rhythmic-melodic pattern was filled in, modulating its tonality and accents as it went. It was a bright idea: the taped keys provided a vibrant wash behind the notes that swelled without audible impetus. That was the piece's most original effect, though, and as the

patterns became continuous, it disappeared into the background.

Lopato's *Piano Roll II* for prepared piano then offered some brash buzzes and hums, but it was a little schizo; the piece would bump along in a stereotypically Oriental way, then break into non-prepared jazz improv, and you were jerked between "getting into" the weird tones and marveling at the virtuosity. Other jazz solos were solid, if more straight-ahead than Lopato seemed to think. But when he launched into an interminable monologue—an account of a trip to Indonesia, with lengthy digressions about herpes, girlfriends, his mom, and his first day at college—I gave up waiting for new music and took a little vacation myself. ■

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